Superstitions—1935

More Otherwise Than Wise

WITCH DOCTORS NORTH AND SOUTH

From what we've read of the witch doctors of the Pennsylvania Dutch country they hold no kinship with the witch doctors, better known as cunjer men, who can be on in West Tennessee more than several years ago when we were trying to make something out of that section. A West Tennessee cunjer man would have heard somebody calling him if he had bumped into a hex specialist toting a butcher's knife and looking for somebody to excavate for a kidney or a gall to use in cooking with medicine. And he would have responded to the call with a marked degree of impetuosity, too. The hoodoo doctors (they weren't voodoo doctors) of our section were Negro men mostly and blood-letting wasn't in their line.

It is true they cast evil spells, but inasmuch as the spells were never more than just fair to middling evil and the ensorcelled person was unaware of the bewitchment their necromancy in this field didn't amount to much. An important part of their business was the making of talismans and amulets to be worn as preservatives against evils, but the department that kept the whole works going was the one devoted to the sale of love powders, the proper handling of which would cause the person the customer was hog wild about, as the poet says, to become hog wild about the customer. They could also take off warts, remove wens, make the sun stand still and do other minor enchantments like that. We've seen them do them. But we grew skeptical of their supernatural powers at an early age. We were willing of course to grant them credit for what they could do but we didn't class them with the gentlemen who turned walking sticks into snakes or started fires with barrels of water.

Ole Uncle Wash, who lived next door to our cook was one. He drew his magical power from a "jack", a thingamado about the size of a package of cigarettes and which was filled with cunjer stuff. We spent a lot of time at the cook's house admiring a whisky bottle with a three-masted schooner inside it, and in that way became acquainted with and grew to like Ole Uncle Wash. He told us lots of tales of the wonders he had worked, some of which we believed and some of which we doubted. For instance, we doubted that he could, as he claimed, wave his arm and cause the Mountain of Mazmataz to move from where it was at that time and take up a place in the corner of his front yard. And when he told us it was the biggest mountain in the world and 350,000 miles away, across 300 oceans, our doubt became disbelief. We knew one little old rheumatic Negro man couldn't do that without help, no matter how many arms he waved. But we pretended to believe it, and all the rest of the stories, which made us solid with him.

Once we bashfully approached him on the subject of the love powders. We were at the time two and one-thirds crazy about an 11-year-old blue-eyed, pigeon-toed angel who had told us to kiss her foot when we wanted to carry her books home from school.

It wasn't puppy love either. We meant it. It got so bad we wouldn't even eat pie unless coaxed. If ever an 11-year-old boy walked in darkness with death in his heart, we were that boy. If we had slain ourself at that little pigeon-toed hellion's feet all the different ways we planned to it would have taken a week. Ole Uncle Wash was Sympathy itself.

"Doan you worry none, boy," he told us. "You take 'n' thow some o' my No. 1 powder on her 'n' she'll be ez crazy ez you is."

We doubted it, but thought it worth trying. Could we get a waterbucketful of it, we asked, and pay for it a nickel a week by holding out our Sunday school nickel? Ole Uncle Wash was indignant. It wouldn't take more than a pillboxful, even in the most stubborn cases, and spose it did, he wouldn't charge us anything for it. We wuzzen like dem other boys that thowed rocks at him and called him names.

Next day at school recess, we threw the powder on our dream girl, unfortunately getting most of it in her eyes. And it didn't work out like Ole Uncle Wash had said it would at all. We were plum disheartened. Of course we could prove we weren't any of the things she called us, but what was disturbing was, she said she was going to tell her big brothers, of whom we had not taken thought up to that time. We thought of them quite a lot after that and took good care to be in places where they weren't. Ole Uncle Wash tried to lie out of it. He said he had told us ESPESHULEE not to try it until the second Sunday after the first Monday of the month, which he hadn't. He said, too, that he would give us another box of the powder and tell us exactly when and how to throw it. We were grateful of course, but told him we'd require at least a month's practice at taking wildcat babies away from their mammas and a two weeks' stretch of pulling highland moccasins through napkin rings before we'd attempt to throw any more powder on THAT girl. If we ever got hollow-eyed about a girl that wasn't all cluttered up with big brothers we might risk one more eye at it, but not unless. But we spoke with the purpose to deceive. Our faith in Ole Uncle Wash's witchery was at low ebb. Our heart was, as is customary in such cases, crushed into a million pieces, but as is also customary in such cases, we got over it without even knowing how it happened. We thought, though, that it would be unfair not to give Ole Uncle Wash one more chance. So we asked him to let us see him ride a broomstick around the pasture lot back of his house, as he had told us he could do, and when he wiggled out of that, we kept him on as a friend but no longer regarded him as an enchanter.

But what we started out to say was all the hoodoo doctors we knew were simple-hearted, kindly old Negroes and the bloody rites of the Hexers would have horrified them just as they do you. They might cheat a little, but murder was no part of their trade. J. D. S.

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LUCKY COINS

It takes all sorts of ideas to make business success. Here's an odd one that worked.

A northern manufacturer who makes steel chains found that his "trace chains" were not selling well in the south. These are harness chains for work horses. The best potential market for them was among Negro tenant farmers, who do not use harness but run the trace direct from the mule's collar to the plow or wagon.

Well, the manufacturer had a survey made, and found that there were more mules and more money than usual in this market, and that some new kind of appeal was needed. Somebody in the outfit had an inspiration. The company stamped out a lot of medals that it called "lucky mule gold coins," costing almost a cent apiece, and fastened one to every set of chains. Now it's selling those trace chains by the carload.

And yet a good many people still maintain that business is entirely a matter of economic laws.